



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

The Hoosiers of New Mexico

The Hoosiers of New Mexico¹ Report One: Small Town Basketball

November 25, 2012

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. Recently, I took a trip back to my home town, Lovington, New Mexico. The visit rekindled my interest in writing a piece about one of Lovington high school's basketball teams, the 1949 Wildcats. This idea came to mind after I had watched a TV rerun of the movie *Hoosiers*.

The movie tells the story of a small town basketball team in Indiana that wins the state championship. The movie was made in 1986 and is based on the 1954 Milan High School basketball team. Gene Hackman plays the role of Coach Norman Dale and costars Barbara Hershey. Dennis Hopper plays the town drunkard, who substitutes for the coach in one game and displays sober brilliance in guiding the team to a victory. Mr. Hopper's depictions of his bouts with the bottle and his mastery of Xs and Os earned him an Oscar nomination.

What makes this story so intriguing is its implausible theme: a backwater bunch of county bumpkins taking on and beating several teams from large urban high schools. Lovington's graduating class of 1949 numbered 38 students.² It's akin to a junior college basketball team beating the Los Angeles Lakers. It's just not what we expect in the real world.

But the old saying, "There is always room at the top" was not lost on these boys and their soon-to-be legendary coach. Perhaps they were ignorant of the odds stacked against them. Even though the high schools in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Roswell, and other cities had large enrollments, only five boys at a time could field the basketball court.



Figure 1 on the left is a post card photo of this team. It was taken after the Wildcats' victory had dumbfounded just about every basketball pundit (coaches, writers) in the state. Just like the movie, no one thought this team had a chance for the title. How did it happen? We will find out.

¹ Basketball rim and ball on cover: <http://www.bing.com/search?q=basketball&src=ie9tr>.

² *Lovington Daily Leader*, March 4, 1965, p. 12.

Digital Records?

When I began doing research to write this story, I was surprised to find I could not locate much documentation on the team, hardly any. The local paper (*The Lovington Leader*) had no microfilm going back that far.

Besides, I have never liked working with this kind of storage: “Microfilming is a technique whereby one may store in a very small volume, a piece of film from which an unlimited number of unreadable copies may be made quickly.”³

The younger readers of this story perhaps cannot conceive of a major subject such as a state basketball championship team not having terabytes of information stored on CDs, thumb drives, and in clouds. In 1949, paper files were the only source of archives. Microfilm and microfiche were emerging technologies, but not yet widely employed.

My friend, Jim Harris, the director of the local Lea County Museum in Lovington, was also unable to help. My brother Ross (Number 11 in the photo) had only anecdotal memories; no statistics or other hard facts. Luckily, my agent SG Mahoney referred me to H.C. Pannell, Jr., also one of the players on the team (Number 33 in the photo).

H.C. (Harlan) sent newspaper articles as well as his recollections of that year. Here are some of his thoughts about the forming of this championship team:

The beginning of the ‘49 team started taking shape [two years earlier]. At the time, I was a sophomore and several in my class liked to play basketball: Donnie Smith, Bill Ponder, Jerry Dean, Kenneth Scoggins, and Warren John (Scooter) McAtee. We went out for the junior varsity team. Our coach was a man named C.C. Polling, who was the head football coach and coached the junior varsity basketball team. All of us had also played varsity football.

The head basketball coach had just been hired by my father, the superintendent. [H.C. Pannell, also a legendary man in this part of the country.] The coach’s name was Ralph Tasker. He had been a star basketball player for the Alderson Broaddus Mountaineers in Virginia. I believe he had coached one year back in West Virginia before committing to Lovington. So as a group four or five of us had been together for several years and played basketball together for at least four years. Donnie Smith was the only one of us that “lettered” in varsity basketball in his sophomore year, 1947.

[I learned that H.C. was in Albuquerque at the time Ralph was being released from the service. H.C. was looking for a coach. Ralph was looking for a job. Their two needs coalesced, leading to the championship described in this report, as well as many other successes in life from this team’s members and Coach Tasker’s legendary career.]

³ From my notes, which I copied down from a forgotten source many years ago. The very quote speaks to its age.

The summer between our sophomore and junior years, we would get together on the weekends and go to the gym. I would get the keys from my dad and several of us would play “horse,” two on two, and three on three. During this summer we were joined by Ross Black, Lonnie Estes, Kenneth Choate, Harvey Teas, and others. A lot of the time was spent at Coach Tasker’s house talking basketball, eating cookies that his wife Margaret made, and bonding. [There’s no short cut to success.]

In small towns (even today), students often played more than one varsity sport. Multi-processing of sparse personnel was needed in order to fill rosters. The same held true for coaches. Most of these men (in those days, only males) taught an academic subject (English, math, etc.) and coached multiple sports. Versatility was the watchword.

I was nine years of age when the 1949 Wildcats were playing. I recall one of their games. It was played at our local gym against the Tatum Coyotes, an even smaller town and school twenty miles north of Lovington. My brother Ed was playing for Tatum. (My parents split when I was five years old. Ed lived with Dad in Tatum.) I recall people at the gym that night asking me which team I was cheering for. True to a child’s profile, I said, “I dunno,” which was the truth.

I recall this gym well, but Harlan describes it much better than my recollections. Imagine such a gym today, one that played host to a state championship team. A modern high school coach could not possibly “recruit” players to play in such a shack. Yes, elite high school players are recruited. Anyway, here is a fine recollection of a past time in America:

Our so called gym was the laughing stock of all of Southeast New Mexico. It originally had been “built” by joining two old wooden school buildings, one of which was originally located in Prairie View and the other by the railroad tracks in northeast Lovington. These two buildings were joined together to make a gym sometime in the late 1920s. They were completely wood structures.

The gym ran East and West. There was a row of bleachers on the north side about 4 rows in all with probably a maximum capacity of 200 people. The playing floor was not anywhere near regulation size. In order to designate “half court” when the team with the ball was in the east end, half court line was located 3/4ths of the way to the west basket. And vice versa. The width was less than regulation, but there was no way to enlarge that dimension. The north boundary was the bleachers and two gas stoves that were surrounded by galvanized pipes. Out of bounds here was either the bleachers or the gas stoves.

The south boundary was the side of the building. It was covered by tin roofing material. There were also four side-by-side windows, painted opaque and protected by heavy chicken wire to prevent breakage. If you hit the metal covered wall or the windows, you were out of bounds. The

west end of the playing floor was wooded and located about three feet behind the backboard. Needless to say, this presented an obstacle to a driving lay-up.

Located on the east end of the court, about five feet behind the backboard were a pair of double wooden doors, which were the only entrance for fans attending the games. If one was not careful on a full driving lay-up, he could very well crash into late comers or worse find himself outdoors [perhaps in a snow bank].

The ceiling and rafters though were the most daunting features about “our” gym. There was no ceiling. The rafters were exposed as were the lathes and shingles covering the roof. On a sunny day, many rays of light filtered through the shingles, and of course when it did occasionally rain, there were puddles on the floor. To the best of my recollection, the rafters were only about five feet above the top of the square backboard. And the top of the backboard was about three feet above the rim. So there was probably only about eight feet clearance to allow any kind of arched shot. (Three point baskets were unheard of in those days. We couldn’t have made one with all the rafters anyway.) When a high arching shot hit the rafter, a lot of dust and even bird droppings would shower down on the floor. So, due to the physical factors of the Gym, we learned to play more under the basket, shoot more bank shots, and rely less on long range shots. This of course gave us a lot of advantage over any team coming to Lovington to play.

Behind the west wall was the dressing room with a door on the south rear side that led to the “shower building.” The shower building was not connected to the dressing room. After the game or practice, you would have to undress, walk outside around to the entrance to a cinder block building with about four showers on the boys side and four on the girls side. I believe there was about one commode on each side. The visiting team had to use the girls shower room as both dressing room and shower.

A couple of the best gyms in the county during the late 1940s were in Monument and Eunice. During our Senior year, we played about twenty games during the regular season. Only two teams agreed to play us in Lovington: Tatum and Jal.

Again, just imagine the handicap imposed on this team by playing most of its games on the road. The home court is a huge advantage in basketball. I recall playing with a Washington, DC Navy team in the 1970s, which played most of its games “on the road.” Adjusting to different lights, floors, basketball rims, backboards, and the overall “feel” of the court area requires a player to make adjustments. These adjustments can add up to become a significant handicap.

Not to mention the home team fans. But in those days, hostility toward a visiting team was rather subdued.

Shortly, we will take a look at this team's season and discuss why it was so successful.

The Hoosiers of New Mexico Report Two: Practice, Preparation, and Opportunity

December 9, 2012

Hello again from Your On the Street Reporter. We continue the story of an improbable Hoosier dream come true, but with the Hoosiers of Indiana relocated---if only symbolically---to a small prairie town in southwest America.

In Report One, a member of the 1949 Lovington Wildcats, Harlan Pannell tells us about the long association of several of the players on the team. They knew and liked one another. They played basketball for the joy of playing, spending time in their antiquated gym; shooting, passing, dribbling, and rebounding, without a coach's interventions.

They were on their own. Their minds and bodies, working in a harmonious but uncoordinated relationship, continued to develop a natural skill for the game of basketball. They were fine examples of the old idea of, "We never do anything well, unless we love it for its own sake."⁴ And they loved basketball.

What they needed was someone who could harness their individual talents into a talented team. As we learned in Report One, just as Coach Norman Dale came to Milan Indiana High School in the *Hoosiers* movie, Coach Ralph Tasker came to Lovington, New Mexico, High School. This man later went on to fame.⁵ But for the year of 1949, he was just another obscure small time, unknown basketball coach.

His coming to this small town was a coincidence. He was hired just after WWII. In 1945, he was discharged from the US Army while stationed at Kirkland Field in Albuquerque. Harlan told me his father, H. C. Pannell, happened to be in Albuquerque on a business trip for Lovington schools. As mentioned in Report 1, there the two men met and the hiring took place.

Classless Competition

In those days of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the high school sports system in New Mexico was one in which there were no divisions based on the enrollment size of a school. All were competitors against each other. The larger schools usually dominated the win-loss columns because they had a larger pool of boys from which to form their sports teams. The boys

⁴ A quote from Mary Wollstonescraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women," 6, 1792, in Leonard Roy Frank, *Quotationary* (New York: Random House, 2001), 256.

⁵ I found this information at Wikipedia by keying in Ralph Tasker. "He coached for over 50 years, including 49 years at Hobbs High School in Hobbs, New Mexico. As head coach at Sulphur Springs (OH), Lovington (NM), and Hobbs, he compiled a win-loss record of 1122-291 (.794). He won twelve New Mexico Boys' State Basketball Championships: one with Lovington (1949) and eleven with Hobbs (1956, 1957, 1958, 1966, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1980, 1981, 1987, 1988). His other accomplishments include twice being named National High School Coach of the Year, induction into the National High School Sports Hall of Fame, and being chosen for the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame Morgan Wootten Award. The Hobbs Eagles' home gymnasium is named Ralph Tasker Arena in his honor. Known for employing a full-court press for the entire game, Tasker's teams were often high scoring, with his 1969-70 team averaging 114.6 points per game and recording 14 consecutive 100-point games, both national high school records."

on the 1949 Lovington team must have overlooked this statistic. As we will see, they defied the odds to win the championship.

Practice and Persistence

The 1949 season did not start well. The team lost its first three games to Portales (a team located north of Lovington) and county rivals, Hobbs and Eunice. But their all-away games made them a tougher team. They experienced a lot of hard knocks on foreign courts, but these knocks eventually opened a lot of doors.

Still, the team did not impress anyone. They even finished second in the (Lea) county tournament. They were not considered a worthy contender to make it through the next round, the District Tournament. To the surprise of many, the Wildcats won the district title. But they were considered non-contenders for the state title. After all, several big school teams were in the tournament, including St. Michaels of Sana Fe, Clovis (home of the famous Clovis Man), Roswell (home of the famous Roswell Man), and Las Vegas (that is, Las Vegas, New Mexico).

On to Albuquerque!

The state championship tournament was held at the Carlisle Gymnasium in Albuquerque on the University of New Mexico (UNM) campus. This gym was to college teams what Lovington's gym was to high school teams: antiquated, dark, dank, and small.

Sidebar: A non-Hoosiers Gym.

The Carlisle gym was in operation when I first attended UNM in 1958. It had been replaced by the grand Johnson gym, but was used for minor events such as intramural basketball and volleyball. I recall this place well. My brother Ross played a one-on-one game with me at Carlisle while he was a student at UNM (and I was a kid visiting him while I was in junior high in Lovington). On that day, I met the famous Coach Johnson. He was as I had heard: a bear of a man wrapped up in a gentle demeanor.

The Carlisle gym had very few bleachers. Its court lights appeared to radiate darkness. Its locker rooms were on a par with those seen in the *Hoosiers* movie: antiquated, dark, dank, and small.

What luck! The gym and its lockers were what the Lovington Wildcats were weaned on. In a sense, they were away from home, but had the home court advantage.

A Scoring Blitzkrieg

It made no difference if the Lovington Wildcats were touted as small-town and bush-league. They left four stunned opponents in their wake. When reading the scores below, keep in mind five facts of those days that do not hold today:

- (a) Offensive players could not shovel (palm the ball). If this rule had been in effect during the Michael Jordan years, Mr. Jordan would not even be in the top ten scoring leaders. (He is number three. The most remarkable player in basketball history is Oscar Robertson. He played in the non-ball palming era. He is *currently* ranked number ten in the all-time scorers' list. Fantastic.)

- (b) A player going for a shot could not take the permitted two steps, *pause momentarily*, then shoot. It had to be a continuous motion. (My younger friends who play basketball disagree with this contention. I simply ask them to look at old film.)
- (c) Players paid more attention to defense.
- (d) There were no three-point plays.
- (e) There were no one-and-one free throw options.

Here are the scores of the games Lovington played in the state finals:

Lovington 57	Aztec 28	29 point victory
Lovington 58	Forest 28	30 point victory
Lovington 60	Las Vegas 40	22 point victory
Lovington 47	Tucumcari 39	8 point victory

This small town team was the highest scoring team in the 29-year-old state championship history. The *Albuquerque Tribune* wrote: "...determination and hard work paid off with the richest bauble in the prep campaign this year. The Lovington team never gave up."

And consider the score differences of the four games: Only the Tucumcari Rattlers came remotely close to making it a contest.

The box scores for Lovington's final and semifinal games are shown on the next page of this report. The Wildcats' Jerry Dean was the high scorer for the tournament. Harlan Pannell was second high scorer for the Wildcats (41). Ross Black was third (36).

Take a look at the box score for Tucumcari's Babers. He scored six field goals and one free throw. (He later became an All-American quarterback for Tulsa University). During the first half, Ross had been assigned to guard Babers, who had already scored *four* baskets and one free throw (estimated first half statistics...to make the ending of this story more dramatic). During the half time, Coach Tasker did not spend much time in the locker room. When he came in, he informed his players the game might be lost if Babers could not be contained. The very player who had not contained him in the first half piped up and bet the coach a milk shake he could do the job. The bet was on.

In the second half, Babers scored *two* buckets. According to the *Lovington Leader*: "Also this week Ross Black is being treated to a daily milk shake by Coach Ralph Tasker. Ross won his shakes from Tasker by bringing a high point man under control in the championship game."

The newspaper article on this page of this report sums it up well: These New Mexico Hoosiers, underrated and unappreciated, made believers of all past skeptics. Just look at those score differences in the final four games!

Box Scores

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME
Tucumcari (39) vs Lovington 47

Tucumcari			Lovington		
fg	ft	pf	fg	ft	pf
Pelzer	0	0	1	0	3
Stone	1	2	5	1	5
Izard	4	6	4	1	3
Babers	6	1	1	9	7
Marshall	3	0	3	1	0
Shockley	0	0	0	4	0
Langley	0	1	0		
Tu'beaugh	0	1	1		
Totals .. 14 11 15			Totals .. 18 11 19		

Half-time score: Tucumcari 28, Lovington 25. Free throws missed: Tucumcari 5—Pelzer, Izard 2, Babers, Shockley, Lovington 10—Smith, Ponder 5, Dean 3, Scoggins.

FOR THIRD PLACE
Belen (31) vs Las Vegas (40)

Belen			Las Vegas		
fg	ft	pf	fg	ft	pf
Brian	5	1	2	4	4
Birner	2	0	1	3	0
Orosco	1	3	5	3	0
Jaramillo	2	0	2	3	2
Gallegos	0	0	2	2	1
Storey	1	0	2	2	2
Tafoya	0	2	0	0	0
Sanchez	1	0	2	0	2
Quintana	0	0	2	0	0
Rivera	0	1	1	0	1
Totals .. 12 7 19			Total .. 14 12 14		

Half-time score: Belen 11, Las Vegas 18.
Free throws missed: Belen 11—Brian, Birner 2, Orosco 3, Gallegos 2, Tafoya, Rivera 2, Las Vegas 10—Fulgenzi, Aragon 2, Roybal 3, Rapp 2, Monroe 2.

SEMI-FINALS
Belen (24) vs Tuc'ari (45)

Belen			Tuc'ari		
fg	ft	pf	fg	ft	pf
Brian, f	4	2	5	1	0
Jaramillo, f	1	0	2	5	2
Birner, c	2	1	3	4	5
Orosco, c	2	0	1	2	0
Storey, g	0	0	0	0	0
Sanchez, f	1	0	1	0	0
Quintana	0	0	2	2	1
Gallegos	0	0	1	2	0
Rivera	0	1	0	1	0
Totals .. 10 4 15			Totals .. 19 8 9		

Halftime: Tucumcari 20, Belen 8. Free throws missed: Belen 6—Brian, Orosco 2, Birner 2, Rivera, Tucumcari 11—Isard 2, Marshall, Shockley, Stone 3, Babers, Langley.

Las Vegas 40 vs Lov'ton 60

Las Vegas			Lov'ton		
fg	ft	pf	fg	ft	pf
Rapp, g	5	6	5	3	0
Roybal, c	2	2	3	3	7
Aragon, f	3	2	3	2	1
Fulgenzi, f	3	2	2	3	3
Anderson, g	0	0	2	3	1
Monroe, f	0	2	1	5	3
Mangum, f	0	0	0	1	0
Totals .. 13 14 16			Totals .. 22 16 16		

Halftime: Las Vegas 18, Lovington 17. Free throws missed: Las Vegas 6—Rapp 2, Monroe, Roybal, Aragon, Anderson, Lovington 6—Pannell 3, Smith, Ponder, Scoggins.

THE LOVINGTON LEADER

AGNES KASTNER HEAD, Publisher
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ACCOMPLISHMENT

The victory of the Lovington Wildcats in the state tournament represents the fruit of a very great achievement. As much as we regret the fact that they had to work under a handicap, we realize that the handicapped usually overcome their handicap and achieve the top of the ladder. Therefore we congratulate Coach Tasker and his entire squad for their achievement that is greater than usual.

Lovington has had to work out under adverse conditions all year. They have not only had inadequate practice space but they have been deprived of the usual home games. This has been a disappointment to both the community and the team.

It is customary that any ball team wins more games on a home court than it does on road trips. For this reason Lovington went into the state tournament unheralded. Their 19 wins and 7 losses didn't stand up very well against such records as St. Michael's 24 wins and one loss. Dopsters overlooked the fact that Lovington's season had been a road season. Few teams could have won as many games if they had to do it on foreign courts.

Maybe the fact that Lovington wasn't a favorite and wasn't considered anything more than a darkhorse helped, but the action of the state sports writers is regrettable. Lovington went into the semi-finals with the highest scoring in ten years and no one seemed to notice them. Coach Tasker said the teams looked stunned after each defeat. No one seemed to feel Lovington could do it, even after they had already done it.

Certainly none of the newspapers over the state seemed to begrudge Lovington the victory. All of them now realize that Lovington was far and above the best team in tournament, but sports writers, including this one, should be a little less record conscious. This past tournament saw the teams with the better record fall when they met a team with a poorer record but a tougher schedule.

Lovington can be proud of its record. Maybe next year, when conditions for training are better, Lovington will also have the record to go with their team. We consider it fortunate that Lovington didn't lose more games, considering odds were against them. After surmounting those odds though, it is no wonder they sailed through the state tournament so freely.